**School Design Proposal**

Georgette Sumners

University of Victoria

EDCI 303: Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Canadian Education

Prof. G. McDonough

7 December 2020

**Introduction**

This school design proposal is written from the view of a pre-existing school as an information booklet for the parents of prospective students.

**Philosophical Foundations and Aims for Service**

Alden School follows the philosophical teachings of Johann Pestalozzi and Alexander Sutherland Neill. Our school believes every child has a right to education and as a society, it is our job to provide it (Gutek, 2001). While this school is an independent day school, it serves as an example and we hope that someday all schools will be run like this with student tuition funded by the government.

Our school steps away from focusing on the traditional curriculum first and prioritizes student wellbeing above all else. We believe every child is innately good (Neill, 1960) and our primary focus is building students understanding of their ‘Head’, ‘Heart’ and ‘Hands’ (Gutek, 2001). Here we recognize that the mind of a young student can have endless creativity, a desire to learn, and new ideas to share (Gutek, 2001). We work to protect the hearts of students by teaching them to understand their own emotions and how it relates to others (Gutek, 2001). Each student has a place here and what they do has value in our community (Gutek, 2001). Each child, no matter their age, is capable of becoming a responsible citizen and caring for others in the community (Neill, 1960) and Alden provides the foundation for students to flourish.

Alden is located in beautiful forest land with a river running through the grounds and many small meadows to be found. We believe it is very important for students to learn naturally through a hands-on style but also by spending time outside exploring the beautiful grounds (Gutek, 2001; Neill, 1960). Our teachers do not use electronic devices in classes until placement 3. All children who choose not to attend classes are required to spend their free time outside whether doing as they please, spending time in the barns, or in the small cottage stocked with arts activities to try. This natural style of learning is seen in class materials which are made from non-plastic materials and neutral or primary colours (Gutek, 2001). We believe that it is not the job of our teachers to impose their attitudes and ideas on the students, but rather, they were to encourage the children’s exploration (Gutek, 2001; Neill, 1960).

Our mission is for students to use their time here at Alden to learn what it means to find fulfilment in life through friendships, discovery, and the meaningful work they do (Gutek, 2001). These things like morality cannot be taught in a simple classroom lesson but through the example set by those around starting with the headmaster, teachers, and on to older students (Gutek, 2001). Our society places great value on money and status, both can be very unfulfilling. We find meaning in life from two places. First is through relationships with friends, family, and the community. Family can be a difficult subject in modern times and so we define family by relationship rather than genetics or even gender; a mother figure is one who teaches, a father figure will be guiding, and siblings are considered someone a similar age who is going through a similar situation the child can relate to. These relationships occur outside of the school, but we also work to have a similar healthy relationship in the school with staff and students. Together each member of our school contributes to creating a community that cares about one another. The second way our students find meaning in life is through the work they do (Gutek, 2001). The play and project-based style allows students to create new things that are meaningful to them and they can be proud of.

We recognize that the traditional education system is broken. Our hope is for students to follow their interest in where it guides them so they can find a place in life that brings meaning (Gutek, 2001; Neill, 1960). Unfortunately, while we can control the environment here at Alden, the world outside remains critical to this type of learning. We work to prepare students on transitioning to traditional forms of education, should they choose to attend, or a common workplace setting during placement 4. We do not try to convert students to fit into these systems but make them aware of some difficulties they may face. Alden’s vision is for our students to show the positive impact of our learning curriculum at this style of school in hopes that one day all schools may transition to this style, eventually eradicating the modern restrictive systems not only in education but university and the workplace.

**Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

Alden School follows a child-centred approach to learning (Gutek, 2001; Neill, 1960). We believe that children are born with a desire to learn and discover the world around them (Neill, 1960). Children naturally develop at different rates and while traditional schools force students to meet certain requirements annually, we give students freedom in their learning (Gutek, 2001; Neill, 1960). At our school students are not required to attend classes but instead, have a choice of what they do with their time (Neill, 1960). We believe students should have this freedom, but our staff will encourage students to attend classes or find something fulfilling to do with their time like playing. Though some fear this freedom may result in chaos after the first few exciting weeks students lose interest in running around aimlessly and choose to take part in the classroom activities (Neill, 1960). Classes students are given a class schedule and school hours run from 9:00 am-3:00 pm with lunch and outdoor breaks.

Our school teaches students from age 5 to 18 with a maximum of 150 students and 13 teachers who offer two teachable subjects. If students desire to receive a diploma for further education, they must still complete the required curriculum learning outcomes set by the government. We offer all traditional curriculum-based classes such as math, language and literacy, science, history, physical education, and the arts. Students are placed in homerooms of approximately 12 students the same age but that is the only class that is age-based. Because students are given the freedom to learn at their natural development, classes are a mixed age based on skill level. Each subject has 4 levels, called placements, which translate to the traditional curriculum as placement 1 (grades K-2), placement 2 (grades 3-5), placement 3 (grades 6-8), placement 4 (grades 9-12). Students may spend more or less than one year in a specific placement dependent on work completed.

We also offer each homeroom a special exploratory class where students go on field trips to learn more about the world and expose them to possible new interests. These trips can be to aquariums, outdoor exploration parks, or museums. Each activity is suggested by students or teachers so we can show students how a job can follow their interests and bring fulfilment.

Learning is active and we want students to have hands-on learning experiences related to real-world problems (Gutek, 2001). While there is a specific learning outcome, how a student learns this new information depends on them. Our goal is for students to be motivated in their learning through personal interests by starting with play-based learning and transitioning to project-based learning by the end of placement 2. Play-based learning is a style of self-guided learning where students are given the freedom to explore new topics and ideas in a hands-on way. In play-based learning students engage all of their senses instead of just listening to information or doing work at their seats. The teacher guides that learning by offering play materials that relate to the lessons and concepts directed by the traditional curriculum. Play-based learning creates meaningful learning experiences while encouraging kids to explore and follow their curiosity. In a play-based science class, a student might learn about different parts of the body by playing a doctor rather than doing a worksheet. In project-based learning students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge. A student who might have a particular interest in baking can complete a math project on fractions by baking a cake using measuring cups, whereas a student interested in sports might report on their favourite teams’ statistics and shooting percentages.

Students' projects will be assessed by the teacher and given feedback, but grades will remain private only used for student transcripts. At Alden, we do not believe in testing students as a means of assessment as it only induces stress and examines memorization of a topic rather than deep understanding (Neill, 1960). All assessment is therefore done through projects and assignments unless a student chooses to take an examination for further education. Because students are not required to attend classes, they must complete certain assignments and projects before they can move on to the next one or up a placement. Should the student lose interest in the project they chose to study they may start again with a focus on a new interest, but all previous work is void assessment-wise. Students are each provided with an education advisor with whom they can discuss future goals. These advisors guide them on classes they must attend, what rate they should progress through the placements, or provide them with ideas and experiences for future careers.

**Governance Structure and Policies**

Alden is a democratic school where each child has a voice that deserves to be heard. We give students freedom and promote self-determination in the day-to-day happenings of the school (Neill, 1960). We believe students should not fear adults and see them as the strict rule enforcers but bring forward their ideas of what they believe is necessary to function as a community (Neill, 1960). Our goal is to recreate a governing system that is seen as fair by the people. While students are not required to attend these meetings, we explain to students that if you one day seek justice or change but do not actively participate in the system that brings it, you will find those voting on your ideas less likely to support you.

At the beginning of the school year, there will be a list of ground rules that must be decided such as whether students must attend certain eating times for food, whether students are allowed to run in the halls, or if students must wear indoor-outdoor shoes. These issues are presented by teachers at a general assembly who must unbiasedly state the positive and negative aspects of each rule. Students then take a vote where majority rules. Even if the vote is within 5 percent of each other, for the first meeting what wins will be enforced as students can present arguments for the second general assembly.

After this, every week students will have homeroom meetings where they can discuss issues or new proposals. The homeroom is also where students decide the appropriate consequences if a student is found breaking a rule. As they are likely to be judged by the peers whom they judged a week before, punishments are found to be fair. A student will present their case or issue and if desired students can offer an opposition. The homeroom will take an anonymous paper vote and if the issue can be resolved in that group such as personal fights or issues among certain students or teachers then they proceed to take necessary steps aided by the homeroom teacher. If the issues regard the entire school the homeroom can vote whether they would like to present it at the next meeting. Each of the 12 homerooms is allowed to present up to 3 issues at each assembly. Each homeroom must choose two students, one to present the issue and one to present the counter-argument. The presentation will need the homeroom teachers to sign off that the issue is represented unbiased.

The general assembly occurs at the beginning of every month. Students vote using an iclicker but for these meetings, the winning case must be represented by 70% of the vote. After each undecided vote, two students in the audience may contribute to the argument with a new idea, one for and one against. If a consensus cannot be met after 3 votes the issue will be brought to the staff board for a decision.

The staff board consists of teachers, the headmaster, the kitchen, maintenance, cleaners, and groundskeepers. The staff board meets at the beginning of every week for general announcements and to present issues similar to the homeroom meetings. Homeroom teachers are also required to present issues at the general assembly when the issues affect student life. When the staff board must make a decision regarding undecided student votes, they must provide the necessary evidence for their decisions. Their decision is announced during the next homeroom meeting.

**Reference:**

Neill, A. (1960). The idea of Summerhill. In *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (pp. 3-35). Hart Publishing Co.

Gutek, G. (2001). Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi: Proponent of Educating the Heart and Senses. In *Historical and philosophical foundations of education: Selected readings* (pp. 67-80). Merrill Prentice Hall.